

THE WILSON BULLETIN

NO. 106

A QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ORNITHOLOGY

VOL. XXXI

MARCH, 1919

NO. 1

OLD SERIES VOL. XXXI. NEW SERIES VOL. XXVI.

THE FOOD-BIRDS OF THE SMITH SOUND ESKIMOS.

BY W. ELMER EKBLAW.

The title of the article in itself conveys a wrong impression by suggesting that any of the birds that come to Northwest Greenland, the home of the Smith Sound Eskimos, is not used for food. Because existence in that far northern region is often precarious and the margin of safety in food supply is always narrow, every living thing in the land may be, and in times of stress is, put into the soapstone pot to boil; and if not cooked, eaten raw. Consequently every bird is eaten, from the little snow-bunting to the great northern raven.

Of course, the Eskimos have their preferences and like some birds far better than others, but in starvation times, when strips of sole leather are the only items on the Eskimo menu, even the oldest, toughest, greasiest, bird is a delicacy. Famine does not often actually face the tribe, but several times in its history the game has failed them so utterly for so long a time that many of the Eskimos have succumbed to starvation. These times of stress usually come in the early spring when first the sun rises above the horizon, before the birds have come back; old Eskimos say that starvation would many more times have overtaken them, except for the timely arrival of the first birds.

The birds of the land most certainly saved the tribe from

extinction during one period of its history, not yet forgotten by the oldest of the people. After one of the famines, accompanied by a plague in which most of the tribe died, the survivors lost the art of making the kayak, or skin boat, for summer hunting. Consequently, throughout the open season, after the ice had gone out, they were unable to kill any sea-food, and since at the same time caribou formed no part in their cuisine, they had to depend entirely upon the millions of birds that frequented the cliffs and islands of the coast. Before the ice went out of the Fjords all the Eskimos repaired to the cliffs of the great bird rookeries, where they could obtain all the birds they needed for food, and stayed there until the ice froze again and permitted the killing of seal and other sea game. This period of dependence upon birds for sustenance for at least two months of each year ended with the immigration of a small band of Eskimos from Baffin Land, who revived the lost arts of kayak-building and caribou-hunting, — a remarkably good example of the influence that an immigrant people may have upon the life of the people among whom they come.

Water-birds form the greater part of the bird-food of the Eskimos; of the land-birds only the ptarmigan plays an important role. All the small land- and shore-birds, the raven and the falcon are eaten, but they comprise no essential part of the Eskimos' dietary as do the ptarmigan and the water birds.

Even the ptarmigan (*Lagopus rupestris reinhardi*) is not so very important a food-bird, and except in the fall, when it is migrating southward in great numbers, the Eskimos rarely hunt for it particularly. Generally they kill it only when they happen to find it near the shore, as they sledge from one place to another, when they are hunting hare or caribou, or when they are attending their hare-snares or fox-traps. When the ptarmigan is migrating southward, and numerous flocks stop to feed on the heather slopes of the high rocky shores, the Eskimos often consider it worth their time and effort to hunt them. The ptarmi-

gan has a sweeter, fresher flesh, freer from grease, than that of the water birds.

Of the water birds, the dovekie (*Alle alle*), the murre (*Uria lomvia lomvia*), the guillemot (*Cephus mandtii*), the eiders (*Somateria mollissima borealis* and *S. spectabilis*), the black brant (*Brenta bernicla glaucogastra*), the snowy goose (*Chen hyperboreus nivalis*), the glaucous gull (*Larus hyperboreus*), the ivory gull (*Pagophila alba*), the kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla tridactyla*), the fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis glacialis*), and the old squaw (*Harelda hymalis*) are the most used for food.

The dovekie is the most important of these at most of the villages and in general is so considered by the whole tribe. Millions of these little birds nest in the sandstone and basalt talus-slopes on Bushman Island, on the Crimson Cliffs at Cape York and westward, at Parker Snow Bay; on the south shore of Northumberland Island, and thence northward on the shores of every bay and Fjord from Inglefield Gulf to Foulke Fjord. The northern limit of their nesting-sites is Cape Hatherton.

Small though they are, the dovekies are so numerous and they are so readily caught by the Eskimo women in the nets used for that purpose, that in a summer the Eskimos are able to catch, and lay away under stones, great quantities of the little birds. When winter comes, and other food becomes scarce, the Eskimos sledge to their dovekie caches, which they find under the deep snow with almost uncanny skill, dig out the tight-frozen masses of birds, and bring them home, where they are eaten raw and whole as we eat oysters, except that the feathers are skinned off. Many times these caches of dovekies laid away in the summer have warded off starvation in the winter times of stress.

Next to the dovekies the murre (*Uria lomvia lomvia*) are the most important food-birds. Four places of Eskimo habitation yield the greater number of these birds — Akpat, on Saunders Island; Igfissuk, on Parker Snow Bay; an-

other Akpat, along the Crimson Cliffs; and Keatek on Northumberland Island. The word "Akpat" signifies in Eskimo, "the place of the murre." The murre are also caught in nets in large numbers, but many are shot in the water or on the wing. The murre are relatively less numerous and less easily caught than the dovekies, but their larger size compensates for these disadvantages, so that the Eskimos eagerly await their coming and catch large numbers, which they lay away under rocks as they do the dovekies. The murre instead of nesting under rocks as do the dovekies, nest on ledges of steep high cliffs.

The eider, — the Greenland eider and in minor degree the king eider — are perhaps of somewhat less importance than the dovekies and the murre. To almost every islet along the coast, hundreds, even thousands, of the eider come every summer to lay their eggs. In the old days the Eskimos caught nearly all the eiders that they used for food in long lines of snares stretched between the rocks where the birds nested, but now nearly all the hunters have shot-guns, which they use most skillfully and with unerring aim. The old snares were very successful; sometimes a line of snares held two-score birds at a time.

The black brants are rather common along the coast, but they are too wary to be killed in large numbers. Only in the nesting season do the Eskimos get many. The snow geese are not at all common, but almost every fall, when the birds moult before migrating south, the Eskimo get a few. As a rule an Eskimo must be rather hungry before he kills an old-squaw for food, but it is fairly common along the whole coast.

Of the gulls, the Eskimos eat every kind. The glaucous gulls are caught in a particular kind of snare along cracks in the ice, and in the open pools about icebergs. The old gulls are rather tough, but the young birds, while in their pale-brown barred plumage, are as tender and sweet as a spring-chicken. The ivory gulls and the kittiwakes are often killed and eaten, too. The kittiwakes are very good,

much like fat young squabs, and always rolling in golden fat. The fulmars are eaten in great numbers in early spring, even though they are most unpalatable, for they are the first birds to return in large numbers. The guillemots, too, are used a great deal for food.

The sandpipers, snipes, and other shore birds are not often eaten because they are so rare or so hard to get. Ravens are rather frequently eaten, and the Eskimos profess to like them.

Besides the birds themselves, the eggs are a considerable addition to the Eskimos' larder. On Lyttleton Island, McGary's rock, and other islets north of Etah, the Eskimos gather thousands of eider eggs, which they store away under rocks for winter use. Likewise in Inglefield Gulf they get hundreds of eider eggs, though not so many as near Etah. The eggs freeze solid and keep fresh until the next summer. At the great murre rookeries, the Eskimos collect thousands of the murre eggs on the high, dangerous cliffs; and in the nesting-places of the dovebies, the Eskimo women and children gather the pigeon-like eggs, which they eat frozen in the long arctic night as the children of the southland eat chocolates. Wherever the dovebies nest in numbers the Eskimos gather their eggs too.

Without these birds and eggs, the Eskimos' food supply would often fail them; and though the abundance of birds is but one of the conditions that make human life possible in that far north country, it is of as great importance as any. Small wonder it is then that the Eskimos half unconsciously mark most of the natural periods of their year by some bird activity or some bird movement; as, for example, the time that we call June, the Eskimos call the time of nesting birds. And just as small wonder it is that they rejoice when the first birds come to their country.